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Agencies issue consolidated advisory for consumers of Willamette River fish

The Environmental Toxicology Section in the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), in cooperation with other affected state agencies, are extending and clarifying existing fishing advisories for the mainstem of the Willamette River. Today's advisory is a consolidation of previous advisories and is not based on additional or different test data.

Based on mercury tests of edible fish tissue dating back to 1969, DHS advises that all species of resident fish in the mainstem of the Willamette River should be eaten only in moderate amounts. This advisory does not relate to migrating ocean fish such as salmon, steelhead, shad or lampreys.

DHS recommends that consumers limit their consumption of resident fish from the Willamette River as follows:

- Children 6 years of age or younger should not eat more than one 4-ounce fish meal every 7 weeks;
- Women of childbearing age, especially those who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, should not eat more than one 8-ounce fish meal per month;
- Women past the age of childbearing, children older than 6 years and all other healthy adults may safely consume up to one 8-ounce fish meal per week.

In addition to limiting the amount of fish eaten from the Willamette River, all consumers should carefully clean, skin and fillet fish before cooking or eating them. Back fat, belly fat, skin and internal organs should be trimmed and discarded. Fillets should be cooked by methods that allow fats and oils to drip off the meat, so the drippings can be discarded. Eating of internal organs or eggs from Willamette River fish should be avoided.

Mercury in the fish is believed to come from natural volcanic and mineral sources in the headwaters of the river and possibly from a number of man-made sources along the river. In many areas of the world, airborne mercury from coal-burning is a significant source of mercury in soil, surface water and fish. This may be one of the sources impacting Oregon. Some of the PCB's, dioxins and chlorinated pesticide residues may be from widely distributed sources over the entire earth and some are from human activities throughout the Willamette River and the Columbia River watersheds. New restrictions on the uses, storage or disposal of these compounds have been imposed in recent years in Oregon and nationally. State agencies and the federal government continue to evaluate and clean up known contaminated sites. It is hoped that these efforts sufficiently reduce many of these contaminants in Oregon waterways so that fish advisories will no longer be needed.

This advisory consolidates advice first issued by the Oregon Health Division in 1997 due to mercury contamination found in fish tissue and further consumer advice issued by the agency on December 5, 2000 based on findings of additional contaminants including PCB's, organochlorine pesticides and dioxins in resident Willamette River fish of all species. Both advisories continue to be necessary, and this notice merely combines the two previous ones. It includes and replaces all earlier fish advisories issued for the Willamette River.

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